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THE CONCEPT OF TAO IN LAO TZU AND CHUANG TZU,

ca. 600 - 200 B.C.

by

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE CONCEPT OF TAO IN LAO TZU AND CHUANG TZU, ca. 600 - 200 B.C. submitted by LAWRENCE P.M. LAU in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Tao is an important concept; however, no one has been able to give a satisfactory definition of it, especially in the Taoist context. It is the intention of this thesis to try to trace the meaning and signification of Tao through the works of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, who were the most prominent figures and founders of the School of Taoism. Tao was seen by both as the active ontological and cosmological principle of nature, of the universe. Since Tao is so difficult to define and explain, it is necessary to give an account of its different aspects, attributes and characteristics. To be natural, to practise wu wei or non-action, is the necessary means to come close to Tao, to realize Tao.

This concept of Tao had a tremendous impact on the later thinkers and scholars. After Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's time, scholars and thinkers spent much of their time and energy in considering the meaning of Tao. It was not uncommon that they inserted their own thinking and interpretations in the explanation of Tao. Some regarded Tao as an abstract concept while others took it to be something physical in the material realm. In present-day China, scholars are still having controversy on whether Tao is materialistic or idealistic.

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INTRODUCTION

A. Intuition and Chinese Philosophy

Observation reveals that of all the characteristics of Chinese philosophy, such as slow development of logical thinking, lack of skeptical spirit and analytical approach, the most outstanding feature is the use of intuitive thinking. Intuition is the direct perception of truths and facts not inferred from spoken or written words. Words and language cannot express intuition which is "in-felt". Therefore, intuition acquired through practice and experience is deemed as more important than learning obtained from the written or the spoken word. Statements in written form in Chinese philosophy are usually arbitrary, dogmatic, and have no dialectical basis. Chinese thinkers tend to jump to conclusions after forming certain conceptions and give no or little reason or proof to back up their statements. For example, Confucius once said that "the true man has no worries; the wise man has no perplexities; and the brave man has no fear" (仁者不憂, 智者不惑, 勇者不懼, The Analects of Confucius, Book IX). Why would the true man have no worries, the wise man no perplexities, and the brave man no fear? Confucius did not explain clearly.

Probably he presumed that the true men, the wise men, and the brave men were supposed to have a direct perception on every phenomenon and were never confused. Automatically, it was taken for granted that they were exalted in what they were. Such statements may appear to be dogmatic and arbitrary, but they have been accepted by the Chinese who have faith in the validity of these statements. There is another old saying that "the true gentleman knows about the whole world without stepping out of his door" (君子不出門，能知天下事). Such a statement is really difficult to understand without an explanation. However, the Chinese thinkers most of the time presumed that, on hearing such statements, people would intuitively understand what they meant, and, interestingly enough, the Chinese, through the ages, have adopted this kind of learning attitude, to accept things intuitively. In the Tao Te Ching (道德經), arbitrary statements are not rare. The first two sentences in Chapter one are good examples: "The Tao that can be talked about is not the Eternal Tao. The Name that can be named is not the Eternal Name."¹ Chuang Tzu is no exception in making arbitrary statements. He once crossed the bridge

¹ These two sentences translated as they are serve the purpose of being examples of arbitrary statements. However, the proper translation should be: The Tao (Way) that can be trodden is not the Unchanging Tao. The Name that can be named is not the Unchanging Name. The translations given in direct quotations have been re-worked by the writer, unless otherwise indicated.

over the Hao river (濠梁) with Hui Szu (惠思) and remarked that the fish down below were happy. Hui Szu asked him how did he know since he was not a fish himself. Chuang Tzu just said that he knew by merely walking across the bridge.

Why do the Chinese thinkers lack logical, argumentative and systematic thinking? It is not because they cannot do so, since some of their writings are highly dialectical (e.g. the writings of Kung-sun Lung (公孫龍), some chapters in the Mo Tzu, certain chapters of the Chuang Tzu and some sections of the Tao Te Ching) but because they are more addicted to intuitive thinking. Chuang Tzu remarked that when a person stood too close to a horse, what he saw was only part of a horse, maybe the shoulder, maybe the hair; a man must stand aloof enough to see the whole animal before he could claim that he saw a horse. In Chinese philosophy, intuition and seeing things as a whole rather than broken up by random observation or detailed analysis is emphasized. The concepts with which the Chinese philosophy works are usually obscure, ambiguous and have no clear-cut definitions. It is quite correct for Yiu-wei Hsieh (謝幼偉), a modern Chinese scholar, to remark that intuition has created Chinese philosophy, and at the same time, limited Chinese philosophy.²

² Chien-chung Huang, et al., A Collection of Treatises on History of Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: Publisher not available, 1958), p.179.

B. Western Attempts at Interpretations of "Tao"

"Tao" is a very important concept in Taoism. However, it is ill-defined and obscurely described by the Taoist thinkers because of their intuitive, seemingly arbitrary statements. It will be the attempt of this thesis to try to analyze the meaning and significance of "Tao", as understood by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Holmes Welch commented that the doctrine of "Tao" covers all the conventional branches of Western philosophy: a metaphysics based on the cosmology and ontology of "Tao" itself; a relativistic epistemology with aesthetic corollaries; and a joint ethics and politics in which wu wei (無為), p'u, (樸) and te (德) are both means and ends. Only a logic is missing.³ This does not tell us much about "Tao", and "Tao" is not a doctrine as we will find out. A number of Western scholars have made good efforts at defining the meaning of "Tao". In the Latin version of the Tao Te Ching by Stanislas Julien, Professor of Chinese in Paris, "Tao" is taken in the sense of Ratio, or the Supreme Reason of the Divine Being, the Creator and Governor.⁴ Stanislas

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Holmes Welch, The Parting of the Way, Lao Tzu and the Taoist Movement (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1957), p.86.

⁴ James Legge, The Texts of Taoism (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p.12.

Julien found that "Tao" was devoid of action, of thought, of judgement, and of intelligence. He concluded that it was impossible to understand by it "the Primordial Reason, or the Sublime Intelligence which created and which governs the world, in other words, God." The character "Tao" (道) itself primarily and properly meant "a way".⁵ As for F.H. Balfour, one of the early translators of Taoist texts, he adopted Nature as the ordinary rendering of the Chinese "Tao".

"When the word is translated Way, it means the Way of Nature, - her processes, her methods, and her laws; when translated Reason, it is the same as li [理], - the power that works in all created things, producing, preserving, and life-giving, - the intelligent principle of the world; when translated Doctrine, it refers to the True doctrine respecting the laws and mysteries of Nature."⁶

It is an honourable, laborious, and well-intentioned interpretation. However, Mr. James Legge did not agree with it. If "Tao" ever had the signification of Nature, he would not have hesitated to employ it freely because Nature is a handy term and appropriate in many contexts. To James Legge, "Tao" is the spontaneously operating cause of all movement in the phenomena of the universe, not a positive being, but a mode of being; it is nothing

⁵ Ibid., pp.12-13.

⁶ Ibid., p.14.

material.⁷ Edward Herbert in A Taoist Notebook says that "Tao" is a word of wonder and power, which originally meant "path" and had come to mean "Truth". "Tao" as a term for the Absolute in the Chuang Tzu was a makeshift one: a name for the Nameless that was not a name, a clue to the Clueless, no more than that.⁸ At this point, Mr. Herbert seemed to have had some understanding of what "Tao" is. Some earlier scholars, General Alexander being one of them, accepted "Tao" as meaning God.⁹ However, the editors and translators of Sacred Books and Early Literature of Medieval China expressed their view that:

.... the Tao is not simply the trodden path; it is rather the impelling force which sweeps us on, the rushing wind of existence, the creative force; and in this sense the Tao comes very near to meaning what we mean by God. Only if we conceive the Tao thus, it must be as a wholly impersonal God standing apart not only from human form but from every quality of humanity which we are prone to attribute to His infinity.¹⁰

To regard "Tao" as God is definitely a misinterpretation, as will be shown in the latter part of this thesis. The

⁷ Ibid., pp.14-15, p.21.

⁸ Edward Herbert, A Taoist Notebook (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p.10.

⁹ Medieval China, vol. 12, Sacred Books of the East, (14 vols., London: Parke, Austin, and Ripscomb, Inc., 1917), p.13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.4.

interpretations above are well-thought of and scholarly, yet they are inadequate and unsatisfactory, though not necessarily incorrect. Some scholars would accept some of the interpretations and reject others. However, when assembled together, these interpretations do help, to a certain extent, to throw some light on the topic.

CHAPTER II

LAO TZU'S TAO

A. The Evolution of Tao and its relationship with T'ien (天 , Heaven)

It is generally admitted that Lao Tzu developed his teachings with the intention to help people go through the troubles and instability of his time, the Ch'un Ch'iu period, 722-481B.C. (春秋時代), during which the various feudal states were contending for power and did not honour the Royal House of Chou (周). However, it should not be neglected that, besides the conditions of the time, the influence of the literary works and thinking of the past played an extremely important role in forming Lao Tzu's philosophy. Lao Tzu was an archivist, who had knowledge of ancient traditions, as well as of the literary materials out of which were later to evolve into the I Ching (Book of Changes 易經) and the Shih Ching (Book of Odes 詩經). He made use of the didactic ideas contained in these works to form a pattern of philosophical thinking.

Religious concepts and belief in non-material forces occupy a good portion of the classical literature, showing the values and ways of thought of the ancient people. The wax and wane cycle of the moon gave rise to

a wealth of rich imaginative thinking. The Book of Changes derived the idea of the Yin and of the Yang (陰陽) and its theory of changes from observing phenomenal changes in nature like the alternate changes of the moon. "The world," the last chapter in the Chuang Tzu, states: "The Book of Changes describes the Yin and Yang".¹¹ (易以道陰陽) There are obvious traces of the Book of Changes' influence upon the Tao Te Ching. For example, the Book of Changes plays with the notions of brightness (明) and haziness or colorlessness (夷), of hardness (剛) and softness (柔). In the Tao Te Ching, we read: "The bright way looks dim" (Chap. 41); "Look at it, but it cannot be seen; it is called the Colorless" (夷) (Chap. 14); "The softest of all things overrides the hardest of all things" (Chap. 43); "To preserve what is soft and tender is strength" (Chap. 52).

Many scholars have treated in their writings the concepts of Shang Ti (上帝 the Supreme Emperor), T'ien (Heaven) and Ming (命 Fate) as the same.¹² It is necessary to point out that these concepts arose out of different cultural backgrounds and followed different lines of evolution as the attitude of the

¹¹ A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, Supplement No.20, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), p.91.

¹² Cheng-tung Wei, A Critical Approach to Chinese Philosophy and Thought (Taipei: The Buffalo Book Co., Ltd., 1968), p.3.

people towards these concepts changed.

Before the Hsia and Shang dynasties, multi-spirit worship together with sorcerers and witches was predominant in religious practices.¹³ As the order of precedence of the spirits developed, the concept of the Supreme Emperor (上帝 Shang Ti), who was professed to be living above and to be in control of everything, emerged. The term "the Supreme Emperor" appeared in many places in the Shih Ching (詩經) and the Shu Ching (書經 Book of History) and other classical works. Alongside with Supreme Emperor worship, the Shang Dynasty also practised an extreme form of ancestor worship. Spirits of the dead were deified, and were supposed to dwell in heaven together with the Supreme Emperor. Sacrifices were offered and sorts were cast for guidance. The ancestral spirits had a great supernatural power because of their affinity with the Supreme Emperor, who was regarded as a tutelary deity of ancestors.¹⁴ In later literature, especially towards the time of the Chou Dynasty, there was a tendency to merge the Supreme Emperor with the ancestral spirits. However, the concept of the Supreme Emperor was well-accepted, and furthermore the idea of Heaven (天 T'ien)

¹³ Chih-hsin Wang, An Outline of the History of Chinese Religious Thought (Taipei: Chung Hua Book Co., 1960), pp.25-26.

¹⁴ Cheng-tung Wei, A Critical Approach to Chinese Philosophy and Thought, p.4.

began to become more prominent and to blend with that of the Supreme Emperor. The blending of the two divine forces could have originated at the end of the Hsia Dynasty, for in the Shu Ching, there is a speech made by T'ang (湯), the founder of Shang, saying:

The Hsia have committed a lot of crimes.
Heaven has commanded me to destroy them
Fearing the command of the Supreme Emperor,
I would not dare to conquer them and
perform the punishment appointed by Heaven.¹⁵

In the classical literature, T'ien has been mentioned much more often than Shang Ti, and the meaning of T'ien is richer and more extensive than that of Shang Ti. Probably it is because the ancient people thought too highly of, or expected too much protection from, the Shang Ti and gradually felt the Shang Ti as indifferent or impossible to reach as natural calamities such as floods and droughts still occurred despite offerings and sacrifices. Interest in Shang Ti decreased and shifted towards T'ien, as the ancient Chinese came to imagine in more detail the "nature" of their impersonal T'ien, and to believe that all the things in the world, no matter whether good or bad, were under the control of T'ien. According to Fung Yu-lan, T'ien or Heaven has five different meanings for the Chinese: first of all, T'ien is seen as physical or

¹⁵ Yu-lan Fung, History of Chinese Philosophy (Hong Kong: The Pacific Book Co., 1959), p.54.

material, as something having the same phenomenal existence as its counterpart, the earth on which we live; second, as the ruling or presiding T'ien, which dominates everything else and which inherited the Shang Ti's former supreme power; third, as the master of destiny, more or less corresponding to the concept of Fate (命), over which human beings have no control; fourth, as the "naturalistic" T'ien, which controls the working forces of nature; fifth, as the "ethical" T'ien, which governs morality and which is the highest primordial principle of the universe.¹⁶

From the worship of the various spirits to the worship of Shang Ti and the evolution along different lines of the concept of T'ien, significant progress in thinking had taken place. More concern for men was emphasized. At the same time, religious elements were also changing into philosophical elements. The "Way of Heaven" (T'ien Tao 天道), with its various meanings and implications mentioned above, constituted the foundation of the philosophical thought of the pre-Ch'in period. The ruling T'ien, the "ethical" T'ien, and the T'ien as master of fate, opened the gateway for Confucian thought (including Mencius), while the naturalistic T'ien and the material T'ien provided the basis for Chinese metaphysics and cosmology. The evolution undergone by these concepts of Heaven had ridden them of the bondage of the spirits

¹⁶ Ibid., p.55.

of superstition and the Shang Ti. Men began to enquire into the forces of nature and the meaning of life (here came the Taoists and the Confucianists). The "naturalistic" T'ien was the forerunner of the basic thought of Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's philosophy. In the Tao Te Ching and the Chuang Tzu there are passages which correspond to some pronouncements of the I Ching (易經) about the Way of Heaven. The Lin Hexagram (臨象) in the I Ching says, "Great progress is that whereby is made correct the way of Heaven."¹⁷ (大亨以正天之道也) In the same book, the Chien Hexagram (謙象) says, "It is the Way of Heaven to send down benefit below and be bright and open-hearted It is the Way of Heaven to diminish the full and augment the humble"¹⁸ (天道下濟而光明... 天道虧盈而益謙). In the Tao Te Ching, we read:

The Way of Heaven may be likened to the bending of a bow. The upper part is depressed while the lower is raised. If too long (the bow-string), it would be shortened; if too short, it would be lengthened. It is the Way of Heaven to diminish the excess to supplement the inadequate.¹⁹

The Way of Heaven has no private affections, but always accords with the good.²⁰

¹⁷ Z.D. Sung, The Text of Yi King, Chinese Original with English Translation (Shanghai: The China Modern Education Co., 1935), p.87.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.71.

¹⁹ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching (Taipei: The World Book Company, 1969), p.45.

²⁰ Ibid., p.46.

In the Chuang Tzu, Chapter thirteen, the Way of Heaven (天道篇), it is said:

It is the Way of Heaven to operate unceasingly and to allow no accumulation, hence the ten thousand things are brought into perfection. It is the Way of the sovereign to operate unceasingly and to allow no accumulation, hence all under the sky turn to him. It is the Way of the sage to operate unceasingly and to allow no accumulation, hence all within the seas submit to him.²¹

Again, in Chapter twenty-five of the Tao Te Ching it is stated:

Man follows the ways of the Earth,
The Earth follows the ways of Heaven,
Heaven follows the ways of Tao,
Tao follows its own self-so-ness.²²
(人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然)

The term "Way of Heaven" (T'ien Tao 天道) carries with it traces of primitive religious connotations and legendary overtones. In expounding his philosophical thought, Lao Tzu even eliminated the "T'ien" from the term "T'ien Tao" and employed the word "Tao" independently. The meaning of "Tao" then used by Lao Tzu has become different from the meanings in the literary works before his time. His predecessors used "Tao" mainly as "road" or "path", regulations or principles that must be followed, whereas Lao Tzu came to use "Tao" as the ontological principle of the universe, a sense in which it had never been used

²¹ A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, p.33.

²² Lao-Tzu, Tao Teh Ching, translated by J.C.H. Wu, (New York: St. John's University Press, 1966), p.34.

before. The significance of that is that Lao Tzu thus destroyed the monopolistic commanding power of the idea of Shang Ti and T'ien of the Shang and Chou periods and established a form of metaphysics. The Tao Te Ching signifies the transformation of Chinese religious belief into philosophy, and the relationship between heaven (nature) and man has become the core of Chinese philosophy. Since ancient traditional thinking was so strong and metaphysical thinking was so difficult to express, Lao Tzu had to resort to intuitive thinking. Because he himself intuitively understood what "Tao" was, he had to share it with other people and make them realize the working forces of "Tao", for T'ien Tao or Way of Heaven is not "Tao", although it is one of the manifestations of "Tao".

B. The Ontological and Cosmological Tao

It was Taoism which first ushered in Chinese metaphysics; however, Taoist thought also concentrates on the philosophy of life. Lao Tzu's philosophy is connected with a cosmology; but it touches also upon a philosophy of life and politics. Fu Kuan Hsu (徐復觀), a modern Chinese scholar, remarked very appropriately, "The motive and goal of Lao Tzu's teaching is not the establishment of a cosmology, but a step by step search, from the necessary

requisite of life to the original source of the universe, for a place in which life could find rest and stability. Therefore the cosmology of Taoism can be said to be a by-product of a philosophy of life. He (Lao Tzu) not only intends to discover the origin of human nature from the origin of the universe, but also, from the origin of the universe he wants to find a mode and attitude of life that would correspond to human nature within the framework of the universe²³ That is to say, Lao Tzu wants to derive a way of life from the working force of Nature which he terms "Tao".

Even before Lao Tzu, Kuan Tzu²⁴ (管子) had already talked about "Tao" as the original source of everything. He believed that the universe came into being from "air" (氣 ch'i), which is formless, quiet and intangible. He called this air "Tao" saying, "Tao has no root, no stalk, no leaf and no flower. The ten thousand things depend on it for life and completion"²⁵ When Lao Tzu came to talk about "Tao", his "Tao" was different from Kuan Tzu's. Lao Tzu believed that the coming into

²³ Ku-ying Chen, Present-day Interpretation and Commentary on the Lao Tzu Book (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1970), p.44.

²⁴ Kuan Tzu is more popularly known as Kuan Chung (管仲), a respected scholar of the early Ch'un Ch'iu period. He later was appointed by the Prince of Chi (齊桓公) as the Prime Minister of the State of Chi, and was praised as a competent administrator and statesman.

²⁵ Kung-wie Huang, History of Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: Kashmir Book Co., 1966), p.92.

being of all the myriad things had a primordial principle. This primordial principle was what he termed "Tao". "Tao" is Lao Tzu's ontological principle. Before Lao Tzu, people believed that Heaven was the creator of all the things in the cosmos. Lao Tzu went further to search for the origin of Heaven, and believed that there was something before the existence of Heaven, that was the primal source of Heaven. That something was "Tao". The Tao Te Ching says:

There was Something undefined and yet complete in itself, born before heaven and earth, silent and boundless, standing alone without change, yet pervading all without fail, it may be regarded as the Mother of the world. I do not know its name; I style it "Tao"; and in the absence of a better word, call it "The Great".²⁶

The coming into being of the ten thousand things has to follow a given order. There must be something which comes first. The order or sequence of coming into being is not in terms of time but in terms of logic. If we hold that there should be apes before men (i.e. evolution), this priority of the existence of apes before men is in terms of time. If we hold that there should be living creatures before there are men, then this priority of living creatures before men can be taken in terms of logic. Therefore, when we say "there are men in existence" we automatically include "there are animals also" since logically existence

²⁶ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching (Taipei: San Min Book Co., Ltd., 1970), pp.39-40.

of animals is prior to that of men.²⁷ To Lao Tzu, "Tao" is logically the first order before the existence of anything. "Tao" is "In Being" (有).²⁸ One may ask what is before "In Being" (有)? Lao Tzu's answer is "Non-being" (無). "In-Being" and "Non-being" appear to be two opposing entities; however, they are one in "Tao" and are the equivalent of "Tao"; they are the two aspects of one thing.

"The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the Mother of All Things."

(無名天地之始, 有名萬物之母) ²⁹

The explanation is that "Tao" is not something concrete that can be pinned down. It has no name and is unnameable; thus "Non-being" is the term employed to describe it. The Nameless is the beginning of the universe, and the Named, which refers to things already come into being and thus nameable, is the mother of the myriad things. In other words, "Tao" can be called "The Nameless" (無名).

"Tao" is the unadorned element which has no name (道是無名之樸)³⁰. Although "Tao" has no name, it is the life-giving factor to all those which have names. The reason.

²⁷ Yu-lan Fung, The New Original Tao (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1945), p.39.

²⁸ It is almost impossible to find an equivalent English term for the Chinese characters, yu (有) and wu (無) in this context. "In Being" here means there is something metaphysically existing. "Non-being" here means out of void, from nowhere, but not nothingness in the actual literal sense.

²⁹ Yutang Lin, ed., The Wisdom of Laotse (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), p.41.

³⁰ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, pp.61-62.

is that, since there are things in existence, there must be "Something" which gives birth to their existence. This "Something" is properly unnameable, but to designate it, we use, as a matter of convenience, the word "Tao", shortened, as shown above, of the 天道 of earlier thinking. "Without a name is the beginning of the universe" does not tell any fact nor does it ascertain anything. For the use of the word "Tao", Fung Yu-lan fails to give any factual information. "Tao", "Non-being", "In Being" or "One", none of the words belongs to any kind of definite thing; they transcend any form. "Tao" is the concept employed to ascertain the rationale behind the formation of all the myriad things. It is the metaphysical, non-empirical "Tao" which is in true existence. Since it does not belong to the material world, it is formless, and does not have any term appropriate for it; it cannot be apprehended directly by the senses. Lao Tzu repeatedly emphasized that "Tao" is unnameable, because once having a name, Tao would be confined by the name. For convenience sake, the word "Tao" is used to designate this mysterious, undefinable "Thing". But "Tao" is not non-existent. Its potentiality is stated in Chapter twenty-one of the Tao Te Ching:

Tao as a "Something" is elusive, evasive, yet latent in it are forms ... yet latent in it

are objects. Dark and dim, yet latent in it is the life-force. The life-force, being very real, latent in it are evidences.³¹

The quotation proves that, in Lao Tzu's mind, "Tao" is something really in existence. While the ten thousand things in the world are multiple and are relative, "Tao" is the only "one", the "Absolute". It is permanently in existence, it would not disappear, nor would it change because of outside forces. That is why it is "standing alone without change."³² Chan Ku-ying (陳鼓應) pointed out that some people equate "Tao" with the Greek philosopher Parmenides' "Being".³³ In fact, it seems to be the same, but it is not the same. Parmenides' "Being" means the "Absolute", it is eternal, and at the same time does not change or move. Moreover, Parmenides denied even the conceivability of "non-being", which is completely at odds with Lao Tzu's idea of "non-being" in "Tao". Lao Tzu's "Tao" is not static. Although in itself it is without change, it is "in effect", in action all the time. When it is "in effect", it causes

³¹ Yutang Lin, ed., The Wisdom of Laotse (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), p.132.

³² Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, p.40.

³³ Ku-ying Chen, Present-day Interpretation and Commentary on the Lao Tzu Book, p.4.

changes which lead to the creation of all the myriad things. Therefore "Tao" is "the fountain-head of all things",³⁴ the primordial natural force of the cosmos. As mentioned earlier, "In Being" (有) and "Non-being" (無) are two terms derived from "Tao" to explain the formation of the universe. The two terms are complementary to each other and are interrelated. "Non-being" implies an unlimited potentiality of life-force, including an unlimited amount of "In Being". The transformation of "Non-being" into "In Being" or "Something" is the process by which the metaphysical "Tao" becomes the producer of all the myriad things. Thereby, "Non-being" does not mean zero, because "Tao" is a kind of potentiality; before it comes into actuality it is latent. "Tao" is latent, hidden, and is nameless (道隱無名)³⁵. Therefore, "Tao" cannot be felt by our senses, it cannot be described by any terminology, it is beyond our ordinary cognition. It cannot be helped that "Non-being" is employed as another name for "Tao". In other words, since they are the aspects of "Tao", "Non-being" and "Something There" are both applied to "Tao", showing the working

³⁴ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on the Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching, p.3.

³⁵ Ibid., p.26.

force of "Tao" turning the formless into a form. This process is the link between the transcendental "Tao" and the concrete world. Thus "Tao" is not an empty concept without basis. Lao Tzu applied many terms of the empirical world to explain "Tao", and then discarded all of them since they are totally inadequate to describe "Tao".

Fung Yu-lan interprets "Tao" as the all-embracing first principle through which all things are brought into being. "Tao's" operations are the operations of all things, and at the same time it is through "Tao" that all things are activated to be all things. He further explains that "Tao", since it is the first principle of all things, cannot itself be a 'thing' in the way that 'the ten thousand things' are things.³⁶ To quote him directly:

Objects can be said to be Being (yu 有), but Tao is not an object, and so may only be spoken of as Non-being (wu 無). At the same time, however, Tao is what has brought the universe into being, and hence in one way it may also be said to be Being. For this reason Tao is spoken of as both Being and Non-being. Non-being refers to its essence; Being to its function.³⁷

³⁶ Yu-lan Fung, A History of Chinese Philosophy, translated by Derk Bodde, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p.178.

³⁷ Ibid., p.178. Emphasis added by the writer.

Thus Fung Yu-lan also affirms the idea that "Non-being" (無) and "In Being" (有) are one in "Tao" as discussed earlier.

In order to grasp Lao Tzu's philosophical framework Feng Kuan (閔 鋒) and Yü Shih Lin (林 聿 時), two renowned scholars of the Republic of China, point out that it is necessary to understand the two terms "constant Non-being" and "constant Being" (常無, 常有)³⁸ because Lao Tzu's "Tao" is the unification of the two. Thus they also support the thesis discussed so far. They explain that the "Being" (有) in "constant Being" (常有) means in existence, but not necessarily in actual existence. "Constant Being" means that it ("Tao") would not disappear, it is always there. The "Non-being" (無) in "constant Non-being" (常無) does not mean not existing, it is conceived as the opposite of the actual "being" (有) which has forms, occupying time and space like the material things. "Constant Non-being" means that it ("Tao") is eternally and invariably "Non-being"; it is "existence without form". It ("constant Non-being") produces all the myriad things while it

³⁸ The word Chang (常) has been translated several ways. Some scholars translated it as "regular"; Fung Yu-lan translated it as "invariable"; James Legge translated it as "constant". Here I also interpret it as "constant" as I find it fits better in this context.

itself does not turn into the myriad things. It is all the time itself; it never disappears. All the things which have a form and concrete body are inconstant. They all undergo the process of production, development, and disappearance. They are neither "constant Non-being" nor "constant Being", for they are in concrete existence; they have a beginning and an end. As for Lao Tzu's "Tao", it is a "constant Tao" (常道); that is, it ("Tao") is all the time itself. "Constant Non-being" and "constant Being" are synthesized as a thesis and an antithesis. It is because "Tao" is constantly "Non-being" that it (Non-being) can be constantly in existence, in being itself (i.e. "Being"). Lao Tzu's "Tao" is the "constant Tao" because it is the unity of "constant Non-being" and "constant Being". In this way, "Tao" becomes Lao Tzu's ontological metaphysics, "The Being".³⁹

C. The Characteristics of Tao

Although "Tao" itself cannot be described, it reveals certain characteristics which can be observed and pointed out when it is in force and manifested in the ten

³⁹ Feng Kuan and Yü S. Lin, A Collection of Treatises on the History of the Philosophy of the Ch'un Ch'iu Period (Peking: The People's Publication Co., 1963), p.276.

thousand things. "Tao" is the way of, a principle of, reversion; it is meek, natural, tranquil, void, wu wei (無為, non-action), gentle and weak. In Chapter forty of the Tao Te Ching it is said:

Reversion is the action of Tao.
Weakness is the means Tao employs.⁴⁰

The operation of "Tao" obeys a principle of reversion. Things move and develop in opposite directions and would finally reach or return to their original state. The word "opposite" (反) in Chinese can also mean "return" (返). Life and death, east and west, are opposites. Without east there will be no west. If one starts from the west to the east, and if one keeps on going, one would finally come back to the west, or his original point. When a life comes into being, it undergoes a process of changes, and would ultimately reach its so-called "end". The "end" could be another beginning. To Lao Tzu, things appear in polarities, but the polarities should not be taken as two distinct, different entities; they go together, they are one, a unity. When one of two contradictory aspects appears, the opposite aspect would inevitably follow. When there is life, there is death; when there is beauty, there must be ugliness; when there is warmth, there must

⁴⁰ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, pp.68-69.

be coldness. That is to say every phenomenon encompasses its opposite. To quote Chapter two of the Tao Te Ching:

Being and non-being produce each other;
Difficult and easy complete each other;
Long and short measure each other;
High and low overhang each other;
Tones and voice harmonize with each other;
Front and behind follow each other.⁴¹

Therefore, one who knows "Tao" would not be perplexed by the relativity of things and phenomena. Polarity is the force which impels things and phenomena to change and develop. Misfortune may encompass elements of blessing; on the other hand blessing may have latent in it misfortune. The Tao Te Ching says:

Disaster! on which good fortune leans!
Good fortune! on which disaster crouches!⁴²

Lao Tzu here reminds people not to see things on a superficial level, but to penetrate further into the reversible effects that are possibly hidden as well. One should realize that creation and destruction are just different aspects of the same process. If one can see the different aspects of a thing (i.e. the opposing possibilities), one can be said to understand that thing thoroughly; then one would not be obsessed by anything that happens. Lao Tzu further points out the function of the inseparability

⁴¹ Ibid., pp.3-4.

⁴² Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, translated by D.C. Lau (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1963), p.119.

of opposites. It is out of the unity of the polarities that things can be of use. By the existence of things we profit, by the non-existence of things we are served (有之以為利, 無之以為用).⁴³ When the ear is cleared of obstacles it hears well. When the nose is not congested, it smells well. When knowledge is cleared of obstacles, one attains the character of Tao.⁴⁴ Chapter eleven of the Tao Te Ching illustrates well the function of the unity of two polarities, material existence and empty space:

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends. We turn clay to make a vessel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends. We piece doors and windows to make a house; And it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends. Therefore, just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognize the usefulness of what is not.⁴⁵

People usually see only one aspect of a thing and neglect the other aspects. As a result, they can never come to realize "Tao", which is obscure and which permeates all

⁴³ Yutang Lin, ed., The Wisdom of Laotse (New York: the Modern Library, 1948), p.87.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.87.

⁴⁵ Arthur Waley, The Way and Its Power, A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p.155.

the aspects of things. Lao Tzu further illustrates the effect of universal reversion which is one of the characteristics of "Tao":

What is in the end to be shrunk
Must first be stretched.
Whatever is to be weakened
Must begin by being made strong.
What is to be overthrown
Must begin by being set up.⁴⁶

The state of things is constantly changing, reaching a high tide and immediately ebbing. It is like a flower: after coming to full bloom it is on its way to withering. A full moon is bound to wane, and a new moon to wax again. In this way, reversion is like a cycle in constant revolution.

"Tao" is the first order of everything. From its "Being" (有) aspect springs the myriad things:

Tao gives them life,
Te nurses them, grows them, fosters them,
shelters them, comforts them, nourishes them,
and covers (i.e. protects) them.⁴⁷

Herein, a question arises. What is Te? What does it have to do with "Tao"? (We cannot just try to understand it intuitively). Te (德) is usually taken as virtue, etymologically it signifies the influence (𠂇 for 𠂈) of a righteous (𠂇 for 直) heart (心), and can mean

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.187.

⁴⁷ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching, p.31.

"to get, to obtain (得)". In certain cases, te (德), virtue, can be bad as well as good. In the Taoist context, te refers to the virtue of a thing which is what it "gets (得)" from the "Tao". That means, the te (德) of a thing is the nature of that thing (物之性), because it is in virtue of its te that a thing is what it is. Thus te is a latent power, a "virtue" inherent in a thing. In the Chuang Tzu, it is said:

In the Great Beginning, there was Non-being; in Non-being there was the Nameless.⁴⁸ Out of it arose One (i.e. first existence); but the One there had not yet come into any form. That which things got hold of (i.e. the One) to come to life, that is called "Virtue" (德 by virtue of which they are what they are). Before things had forms they (all) had their (own preordained) lots; temporarily (姑且, 暫且) without any crack (to separate them from each other, those lots, taken together) are what is called Fate (there is a Fate, which breaks down into individual lots). Out of the flow and flux, things were born. As things realized their native principle (the principle which was in germ in them at their birth), (they became) what is called forms. The forms and bodies nurtured (保育) (within themselves) a spirit, each having its

⁴⁸ Mr. Burton Watson translates this sentence as "there was nonbeing; there was no being, no name." Mr. James Legge translates it as "there was nothing in all the vacancy of space; there was nothing that could be named." I translate it as "there was Non-being; in Non-being there was the Nameless", because I understand the text as "泰初有無, 無有無名". Chapter one of the Tao Te Ching confirms my interpretation: The Nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth (無名為天地之始). The important word in this sentence is the first 有, which shows that, for Chuang Tzu, 無 is not nothingness, but something slightly more substantial. 無, in fact, is the "chaos", as opposed to the "cosmos". The character shows a barrier and refers to what is outside, just as, in Latin, we have "foras", outside, coming from "fores", gate.

own way to manifest itself (the 我 of 儀), and this was called the inborn nature (性). If its inborn nature is cultivated, it returns to Virtue (德). When Virtue is fully reached, it is identical with the Beginning. (泰初有無... 德至同於初)⁴⁹

"In the Great Beginning, there was Non-being". The "Non-being" is one aspect of "Tao". That of which things get hold (the "Tao", the One) in order to come to life is called te (德). Thus "Tao" is revealed in te; te is the actualization and manifestation of "Tao". This is what Lao Tzu called "Tao" giving things life and te rearing them. It is the te in them which makes them develop into what they are, which lets them follow their life course according to their inborn nature. Chiang Mou (江袤) pointed out that "Tao" and te are in fact the same, but with different names. "Tao" is the common ground of all things, and te is the form from which each thing gets for itself its inborn nature. Water is a good example which may be used to clarify the above statement. Sea water is different from pool water and river water. The property they hold in common is that they are all water. In this sense, water is the "Tao". However, water in a river flows and water in a pool is still; it is because of their te (德) that they are what they are, that river water will flow and pool water remains still.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, p.30.

⁵⁰ Yu-lan Fung, Philosophy of Life (Hong Kong: Shih Hsueh Book Store, 1924), pp.22-23.

Therefore, "Tao" and te are playing the roles of substance and attributes of a thing. When the metaphysical "Tao" gives birth to the ten thousand things, it turns into the te of the ten thousand things. Te is the metaphysical "Tao" "descending" onto the empirical world. Therefore, the characteristics of "Tao" such as being natural, meek, tranquil and non-active, all belong to the sphere of te; they are the "Virtue" of "Tao".

Taoism initiated Chinese metaphysics. As mentioned before, the main stress of Taoist philosophy is on the understanding of life, and the proper way to lead a meaningful life. "Tao" is transcendental, but it provides a good guideline for men to follow. "Tao" is the ontological principle of the cosmos and the ten thousand things, and te is the fundamental, inborn nature of all the myriad things. Sze-ma T'an (司馬談) in his Examination of the Six Schools talked of the Taoist School as the school of wu wei (無為).⁵¹ To be natural and to practise wu wei is for the Taoists the key to a meaningful life. Wu wei and naturalness have to be defined in the Taoist context in order to make things clear. The literal translation of wu wei by "doing nothing" or "non-action" is very misleading. It does not mean "doing nothing". It

⁵¹ Szu-ma Ch'ien, The History, Vol.X (10 vols. Hong Kong: Chung Hua Book Co., 1969), p.3292.

means "not to act deliberately or needlessly, not to take any avoidable, unnecessary action". The Taoist sage is not like the Indian hermit who sits cross-legged in complete immobility performing his "transcendental meditation". He can do the minimum necessary to sustain life, but does not have to be grim; on the contrary, he is quietly and peacefully cheerful, not to say inclined to banter and mockery. In order to understand the term wu wei better, it is necessary to explain the meaning of nature and naturalness (自然 Tzŭ Jan) in the Taoist context.

Nature is not to be taken simply as the concrete universe or all the things which exist in the external world: it should, likewise, include the qualities, properties, potentialities and capacities of every being, every particle; also the characteristics of a thing are inborn in them. The nature of a thing is inseparable from a thing, neither could anything be added to it. To be natural is to let things develop freely by themselves without any deliberate outside action to contradict their nature. In planting a seed, it is its nature that it will germinate, grow, go through its life cycle and die. It is the nature of man that he eats when he is hungry, puts on clothes when he feels cold. Those are acts performed naturally according to nature, and to act this way is to practise wu wei. Then everything will be performing its

own duty, playing its part in its proper place, and, as a result, everything will be accomplished. Nature or naturalness is not a concrete thing but a descriptive term depicting "spontaneous" and "self-so-ness". In observing the physical world and its phenomena, and in perceiving the natural force working behind it, Lao Tzu, through an inductive leap, came to the belief that every natural phenomenon is perfect, following a well-built order or procedure. It may appear to be in a loose or dispersed condition, however: "Vast is Heaven's net; sparse-meshed it is, and yet nothing can slip through it."⁵² Therefore all things revere "Tao" (尊道) and honour "Virtue" (te 貴德). Yet if "Tao" is revered and "Virtue" honoured, it is not on account of a positive command to do so, but because it is natural for them to be treated so.⁵³ "Tao" and te never interfere with the naturalness of anything. Following the example of "Tao", the sage only helps all the creatures to go along with their own natures and does not venture to impose anything on them.⁵⁴ When his task is accomplished the people all say, "It

⁵² Chien-chung Huang, et al., A Collection of Treatises on History of Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: publisher not available, 1958), p.291.

⁵³ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching (Taipei: The World Book Co., 1969), p.31.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.39.

happened of our own naturalness."⁵⁵ Nature or naturalness is spoken of as the working state of the physical world while wu wei is spoken of as the activity of man, especially in the political aspect. "Tao" never acts, yet it does everything."⁵⁶ Lao Tzu directs this sentence to advise against those rulers who meddle with the common people, i.e. yu wei (有為) or who indulge in deliberate, purposeful activity, as opposed to wu wei. Lao Tzu says:

The people are difficult to govern: It is because those in authority are too fond of action that the people are difficult to govern.⁵⁷

The common people would benefit a great deal more if the ruler followed wu wei. Then both the ruler and the ruled would be at ease.

I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple.⁵⁸

Love of tranquility, abstention from unnecessary activity, and absence of desire are the qualities of wu wei. If

⁵⁵Ibid., p.10.

⁵⁶Ibid., p.21.

⁵⁷Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, translated by D.C. Lau, p.137.

⁵⁸Wing-tsit Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.167.

the government exercises wu wei, self-fulfillment by the people themselves will come about. In view of this, Lao Tzu would like to see people have the greatest freedom to carry out their will, so as to permit the free development of each person's particularity, variety, and individuality, as long as it does not disrupt other people's free development. Another aspect of wu wei has to be clarified. To practise wu wei does not mean to be lazy or to lack the will to do anything. Some people, on the other hand, misunderstand it as an attitude of not doing anything outwardly, but secretly doing everything possible to achieve one's own aims. Ch'ien Mu (錢穆) thus suspects Lao Tzu of having been a secret plotter with private ends to serve.⁵⁹ It is a complete misinterpretation. Wu wei is a way and attitude of doing things. To practise wu wei is to adopt the "wu wei" way of "doing". Lao Tzu does not oppose human effort itself but opposes the employment of more effort than is needed; he still wants people to act, to express their abilities, realize their potentialities and realize their energy; but he does not want them to strive, to cling to their achievements or to crave for the enjoyment of the fruits thereof. Chapter two of the Tao Te Ching says, "To act, but without intent."

⁵⁹ Ku-ying Chen, Present-day Interpretation and Commentary on the Lao Tzu Book, p.45.

That means acting without a self aim or intent for glory.
 The last chapter also says, "To act, but not to compete."⁶⁰
 (為而不爭)

Thus humility, weakness, tranquility, relaxation and non-striving are the characteristics of wu wei and "Tao". It is because "Tao" is lonely, never full, that the use of it is inexhaustible.

Tao seems to be empty, yet it cannot be exhausted by use. Fathomless, it seems to be the origin of the ten thousand things.⁶¹

The word "empty" here does not mean nothing in the physical sense; it is equivalent to Non-being, and there concealed in it is the factor of creativity. Since it is empty (虛), it seems to be quiet, desireless. Lao Tzu said, "To be dispassionate is to be still. The whole empire would be (then) at peaceful rest of its own accord⁶² Limpidity and tranquility is the Norm of the world."⁶³ Although "Tao" seems to be weak, it is all the time persistent. Weakness is the way in which Tao operates (Ch. 40). "Tao" is continuous, and seems to be always existing. Use it and you will never wear it out (Ch. 6). It is because of this "weakness" manifested by "Tao" that the myriad

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.30-31

⁶¹ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching (Taipei: The World Book Co., 1969), p.3.

⁶² Ibid., p.21.

⁶³ Ibid., p.28.

things feel themselves not as created by a will, but as coming into being of themselves, spontaneously. Lao Tzu also applies this idea of weakness to life, saying that the tender and weak will triumph over the hard and strong. He made another observation of the physical and empirical world and pointed out that

when alive, man is supple and weak, but stiff and hard when dead. Grass and trees are tender and supple when alive, but withered and dried when dead. Thus the hard and stiff are the companions of death; the supple and weak are the companions of life.⁶⁴

To Lao Tzu, the hard and strong are at their climax and are inevitably on the decline, while the soft and weak are full of life. Water is his best example of the tender and weak overcoming the hard and strong.

There is nothing softer and weaker than water, yet there is nothing better for attacking the hard and strong. For this reason there is no substitute for it.⁶⁵

What Lao Tzu wants to stress is not just the softness and weakness of water, but also the power of its persistence and perseverance. Softness and weakness have the connotations of flexibility, adaptability, and aptitude to take the shape of anything else, which are qualities useful for survival. Lao Tzu advocates these qualities because they are going side by side with "Tao".

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.45.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.46.

CHAPTER III

CHUANG TZU'S "TAO"

A. Expansion of Lao Tzu's Concepts

Chuang Tzu's "Tao" also has cosmological and ontological connotations. There has been an unsettled controversy as to whether the Tao Te Ching was written after or before Chuang Tzu's time. Both opposing parties have good bases for their respective stands. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this issue, but I take the position that Lao Tzu, the person, existed before Chuang Tzu and that his ideas did influence Chuang Tzu's views, maybe from the bits and pieces of the not yet compiled Tao Te Ching which may have come to the knowledge of the latter thinker. Chuang Tzu appears to us as the most mature among all the thinkers of his time. The Chuang Tzu, although many are skeptical of its authorship, especially of that of the so-called "Outer Chapters" (外篇), is both more explicit and more detailed than the Tao Te Ching. Chuang Tzu expands some ideas which Lao Tzu had left undeveloped and unexplained. He raises Taoism to another level and unintentionally sets up the foundation for the Taoist School of philosophy. (The names of the various schools of

thought were given currency by Szu-ma Ch'ien (司馬遷), the "grand historian" of the Han Dynasty, in the 2nd century B.C.)

In the same way as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu also takes "Tao" as his first ontological and cosmological principle; at the same time, he looks upon "wu wei" and "Nature" in the same way as his predecessor. Many of his sayings are similar to those of the Tao Te Ching. To Lao Tzu, "Tao" is unnameable, born before heaven and earth, and is the origin of the myriad things. We read in the Chuang Tzu:

Tao cannot be heard; that which is heard is not Tao. Neither can it be seen; that which is seen is not Tao. Nor can it be told; that which is told is not Tao. Do you know that that which gives form to the formed is itself formless? Tao should not be named.⁶⁶

Again:

There is (in the hearts of men) a feeling of, and a belief in (the existence of), Tao, (although) it has no (apparent) action and no form. It may be transmitted but cannot be seen. It is its own source, its own root. It existed before heaven and earth, firm since ancient times. It gives their spiritual powers to demons and to gods. It ranks before (in point of height) the highest summit, yet it is not lofty. It underlies the six directions, yet it is

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Ling-feng Yen, A New Edition of the Four Eminents of the Taoist School (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1968), p.605.

In the Wisdom of Lao Tze Lin Yutang translates the last but one sentence of this quotation 知形形之不形乎 ? as "Do you realize that which is invisible in all the visible things?" I think it would come closer to the intended meaning if translated as "Do you know that that which gives form to the formed is itself formless?".

not deep. It is prior to heaven and earth, but it is not ancient. It antedates the utmost antiquity, but it is not old.⁶⁷

To Chuang Tzu, "Tao" is everywhere, not just limited to man or physical things; it is within everything. Tung-kuo Tzu once asked Chuang Tzu where the so-called Tao is? Chuang Tzu replied that it is in the ant, in weeds, in earthenware and tiles, and even in excrement. He further remarked that the question does not touch the essentials. One should not specify any particular place, for nothing can be outside of Tao. "Complete", "Entire", and "All", are three different words with the same meaning. They all designate one reality.⁶⁸ Chuang Tzu wants to point out that "Tao" is the all-embracing One, the ultimate reality of everything. One, or Completeness, is the word to describe "Tao". The last chapter of the Chuang Tzu says:

They (the Taoists) built their system on Constancy (常), Non-being (無), Being (有), and headed their doctrine with the concept of the Great One (太一).⁶⁹

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National Studies Arrangement Board, The Accumulated Works of the Ancient Thinkers and Philosophers, Vol.3 (8 vols.), (Shanghai: The World Book Co., Ltd., 1935), pp.111-112.

68

Hsien-chien Wang, Explanatory Notes on the Chuang Tzu Book (Taipei: San Min Book Co., Ltd., 1963), p.127.

69

A Concordance to Chuang Tzu, pp.92-93.

Again:

In the Great Beginning, there was Non-being; in Non-being there was the Nameless. Out of it arose One; but the One there had not yet come into any form.⁷⁰

The Great One is "Tao"; it is out of "Tao" that the "One" arose. "Tao" is, therefore, the "Great One" (太一), it ranks higher than One. Every matter or thing is derived from "Tao"; "Tao" is "Complete". What is destruction to some is production to others, and what is production to others is destruction to some. Whether things are produced or destroyed, "Tao" identifies them as one.⁷¹ Thus no matter whether production or destruction, they are all in "Tao", which is all-inclusive, complete. If somebody sees only one side of a thing, then the view he gets of it is partial and cannot be called complete; therefore, for Chuang Tzu, all sides, or the whole thing, must be seen. Chuang Tzu's idea of "Completeness", of equalizing all thing (齊物) or turning all into one, has greatly expanded Lao Tzu's "Tao". Since "Tao" is "Complete", devoid of any relativity or polarity, logically it cannot be "Being (有)", nor can it be "Non-being (無)", because if there is "Being", its opposite, "Non-being", must exist. In this case,

70

Ibid., p.30.

71

Wing-tsit Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, p.184.

"Tao" can only be a "Non-non-being (無無)".⁷² When "Being" and "Non-being" go together, they are "Complete". Thus Chuang Tzu confirms the vagueness and ineffability of Lao Tzu's "Tao". Chuang Tzu also wants people to see things as a whole, to realize that the opposite aspect of a thing is just as important. He told a story of his being a butterfly in his dream and wondered if he was really a butterfly dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu, or if it was Chuang Tzu himself dreaming that he was a butterfly. There are different ways to understand this anecdote. What he wants to demonstrate could be that people should not regard real life as a dream nor should they regard dreams as reality. Dreams are part of life; both dream and life belong to the same process. Both "Being" and "Non-being" must come together in order to produce any effect. When one thing occurs, its opposite would automatically come into being. But people usually just pay attention to one or the other. Music and oriental painting illustrate this well. The musical notes and the drawing can be the "Being"; the pause or interval between the notes and the blank space in the painting can be the "Non-being". It is only when there is pause and empty space that music and painting can come about.

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Yu-lan Fung, A New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy (Peking: The People's Publication Co., 1964), p.378.

By means of logic, Chaung Tzu proves that "Tao" is non-material. In Chapter twenty-two of the Chuang Tzu, it is said:

There is that which was born before Heaven and Earth, but is it a thing? That which makes things things is not a thing. When things (first) came forth, they had no predecessors, (because, if) there still were things, there would still be (other) things, and so on without end.⁷³

This means that what makes the myriads of things what they are must itself not be a thing (物物者非物), for if it itself is also a thing, then before it there should be another thing to make it into a thing, and this can go on this way for ever. Therefore, this "Thing" which makes things things and is itself not a thing has to be a "Non-being". Since it is a "Non-being", it has no name, and "Tao" is a name ascribed to it for the sake of convenience.

"Tao" is not anything, it is transcendental, but it is everywhere; it is also in the world, in which sense, it is clearly not transcendental. It is the whole of the spontaneity or naturalness of the world. Everything in the world spontaneously produces itself; the totality of the spontaneity of all things is "Tao". Things are spontaneously what they are and do what they

do; in this way "Tao" is not doing anything. But from another standpoint, since "Tao" is the total spontaneity of all things, what things spontaneously are and do is also the work of "Tao". Thus "Tao" can do everything by doing nothing.⁷⁴ By giving such an exposition of "Tao" Chuang Tzu's idea of wu wei is also revealed.

B. T'ien (Heaven) as Nature

Chuang Tzu and his followers did not believe in a Controller or God other than "Tao". "Tao's" working force is that of spontaneity. To Lao Tzu, man follows the way of the earth, the earth follows the way of heaven, heaven follows the way of "Tao", and "Tao" follows its own self-so-ness. Chuang Tzu holds the same view. Chapter twelve of the Chuang Tzu says:

Skill is implicit in a job; a job results from duty; duty is attached to virtue; virtue derives from Tao and Tao is inherent in Nature.⁷⁵
(技兼於事, 事兼於義, 義兼於德, 德兼於道, 道兼於天)

Here, Heaven means nature, spontaneity. To say that "Tao" is inherent in Nature is the same as saying that "Tao" follows its own self-so-ness (道法自然). Although Chuang Tzu's teaching is also centered on "Tao", the mention of the ontological "Tao" is not so frequent in his book as in the Lao Tzu.

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Yu-lan Fung, Chuang-Tzu, A New Selected Translation with an exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang, (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1964, pp. 6-7.

75

James Legge, tr., The Texts of Taoism, Part I (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 308.

In many places, T'ien or Heaven is a substitute for "Tao" or nature. "Way of Heaven" or "Nature" versus "way of man" occupies the major part of his work. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Heaven has several meanings. In the Chuang Tzu, Heaven mainly refers either to the material T'ien or the naturalistic T'ien, depending on the context. In his teaching, Chuang Tzu tends to stress the proper attitude and activity of man according to nature. In many occasions, Heaven and man are mentioned together. There is a conversation between Kung-wen Hsien and the Commander of the Right: "...How did he come to have only one foot?⁷⁶ Was it Heaven? Or was it man?" The Commander said, "It was Heaven, not man. When Heaven produced me, it made me one-footed this was the work of Heaven, not of man."⁷⁷ In the beginning of Chapter six, it is said that he who knows the work of Heaven and the work of man has reached perfection.⁷⁸ In Chapter five, Chuang Tzu said, "The Tao gives personal

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Mr. B. Watson translates this sentence as "How did he come to be footless?" while it should be "How did he come to have only one foot." The text is 意乎介也 .
 介 means one foot, (莊子集解).

77

Hsien-ch'ien Wang, Explanatory Notes on the Chuang Tzu Book, p.19.

78

Ibid., p.35.

appearance (and powers); Heaven gives bodily form"⁷⁹ Chuang Tzu did not expatiate as much on metaphysics as did Lao Tzu. Chuang Tzu's main concern was with Heaven and man. He talked about nature as "Tao" and nature as Heaven. It is because Chuang Tzu gave so much importance to nature that Hsün Tzu commented that his teaching did not see man for Heaven (蔽於天而不知人).⁸⁰ To Chuang Tzu, in order to comply with nature, the best way is to follow wu wei (as also advocated by Lao Tzu) and to understand Heaven, which covers everything. "To act by not acting is called Heaven (Nature)."⁸¹ If man wants to meddle around and go against nature, then pain and suffering will ensue. Chuang Tzu gave a good example, when he pointed out that ducks' legs are short and cranes' legs are long, and that neither can the former be lengthened nor the latter be shortened. If man shortens what is by nature long or lengthens what is by nature short, he will only cause harm. Kuo Hsiang (郭象), a famous commentator on the Chuang Tzu, explained nature and

79

James Legge, tr., The Texts of Taoism, Part I, p.235.

80

Lecture notes on Classical Chinese.

81

Yutang Lin, ed., The Wisdom of Laotse, p.75.

and wu wei very well in his commentary on Chapter four:

"The feet can walk; let them walk. The hands can hold; let them hold. Hear what is heard by your ears; see what is seen by your eyes. Let your knowledge stop at what you do not know; let your ability stop at what you cannot do. Use what is naturally useful; do what you spontaneously can do. Act according to your will within the limits of your nature, but have nothing to do with what is beyond it. This is the most easy matter of non-action. When you believe in the principle of non-action, your life cannot but be perfect"⁸²

To show the importance of knowing nature, Chuang Tzu talked of a butcher who knew the structure of a cow so well and cut, accordingly, so accurately that he did not make his knife blunt through years of butchering. The same applies to man; if man knows nature and lives according to nature, he will have a perfect life. The problem is that man does not even know his nature well.

Wu wei is also the ideal political theory for the Taoists. "Those above (the rulers, the sages) must practise wu wei and thus put the world at their service. Those below (the common people who do not practise wu wei) will act deliberately and thus be made to serve the world (上必無為而用天下, 下必有為為天下用)."⁸³ It does not mean that the ruler above does not do anything; he is just

⁸² Yu-lan Fung, Chuang-Tzu, A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang, pp.9-11.

⁸³ Hsien-ch'ien Wang, Explanatory Notes on the Chuang Tzu Book, p.75.

channelling the talent of the people into its proper use. Then everything will be accomplished without excessive effort. If the ruler tries to do everything himself, or to meddle in people's work, then he is hindering a smooth process, and this is against wu wei. Again, Kuo Hsiang

(郭象) has an excellent commentary on this issue:

The carpenter is in nonaction when carving wood, but he is in action when using the axe. The prince is in nonaction in the management of affairs, but he is in action in the control of ministers. The ministers can manage affairs, while the prince can control ministers. The axe can carve wood, while the carpenter can use the axe Everything has its office. The high and the low both have their proper places. This is the perfection of the principle of non-action.⁸⁴

The carpenter is letting the axe carry out its proper function. If he uses the axe to do things which are not meant for the axe, like rowing a boat, then he would be violating wu wei and would be exerting excessive effort. The same case applies to the prince and the ministers. Mr. W.E. Soothill quoted from the Chuang Tzu a saying that "inaction (i.e. effortlessness) but honourable, that is the Tao of Heaven. Action (i.e. effort, striving) with (consequent) embarrassment, that is human Tao. (Of

⁸⁴ Yu-lan Fung, Chuang Tzu, A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang, p.152.

these) the celestial Tao means lordship, human Tao bondage. How far apart are the celestial Tao and human Tao from each other!"⁸⁵ He further remarked that Tao seems to be the creator, preserver and destroyer, for in the Chuang Tzu it is said:

"My master! My master! thou dost break in pieces all things, and dost not account it cruelty; thou sprinklest favours on all generations without accounting it as beneficence;"⁸⁶

This means that "Tao" is indifferent, treating everything in the same way. In the course of wu wei, things just happen; construction, destruction, good, or bad, all have their own course to run. Through these, Chuang Tzu developed the idea of equalizing all things and the attitude that joy and sorrow, life and death can be disregarded.

Chuang Tzu's concept of the "Tao", te and wu wei is the same as that of Lao Tzu. His philosophy differs from Lao Tzu's in the way that he expanded Lao Tzu's ideas to a much broader sphere. More concern for nature and man is revealed in his stress on the unification of man and nature, which was his main intent.

⁸⁵ W.E. Soothill, The Three Religions of China (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp.65-66.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.66.

CHAPTER IV

MATERIALISTIC AND IDEALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

A. Interpretations by other Scholars and Commentators

Since Lao Tzu adopted the word "Tao" to designate the cosmological and ontological principle, many thinkers and scholars also used the word "Tao" as a name for their own concepts of the original principle of the universe and the ten thousand things. Some of these thinkers followed Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu very closely and their concepts of "Tao" were quite the same as that of those two thinkers. However, some of them developed their own ideas or blended the ideas of other schools of philosophy to form their concepts of "Tao", especially the thinkers of the post-Ch'in period. Their ideas may differ, but credit must be given to Lao Tzu who was among the first ones to use "Tao" to explain the origin of the myriad things and thus gave them inspiration to form those new ideas. Some of those thinkers took the stand that the origin of the cosmos was abstract, mysterious and beyond knowledge, while some others took the stand that there must be some substance which originated the ten thousand things. Thus, many scholars, especially those from the People's Republic of China, raised the question

of whether Lao's and Chuang's concept of "Tao" was taken from an idealistic viewpoint or from a materialistic viewpoint.

In the Han and the post-Han period, the teaching of the Yin Yang School was very popular. Yin Yang and the five elements which were believed to be the basic components of the material world, namely, metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, penetrated not only into the preoccupations of the populace but also into the thoughts of scholars. Tung Chung-shu (董仲舒), a Confucian scholar as well as the Prime Minister of Emperor Han Wu Ti (漢武帝), believed that the "Prime One" (一元) was the Great Beginning, and it was "Air" (氣), formless and invisible, which gave rise to the formation of the myriad things. The "Prime One" was the unity of the "Air" (氣) from Heaven and Earth, which was divided equally into Yin and Yang. He further expounded that the Yin "Air" and the Yang "Air" could change into one another. He took the example of a pot of water. When the water was not heated, it was purely Yin, and when it was heated to a boil, it became purely Yang.⁸⁷ Han Ying (韓嬰), another scholar, also held the same belief as Tung Chung Shu, thinking that it was "Air" out of

⁸⁷ Shun-ch'in Yao, History of the Ch'in and Han Philosophy (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1936), pp.120-121.

which evolved Heaven and Earth.⁸⁸ This notion of "Air" sharply implied that they (Tung and Han) looked upon Lao Tzu's "Tao" from a materialistic viewpoint. When it came to Yang Hsiung (揚雄), he based his ontological principle on "the Mysterious" (玄), which is very similar to Lao Tzu's "the Mystery of mysteries is the Door of all secret essences."⁸⁹ Yang Hsiung said: "When you raise your head and look up, it is above; when you lower your head and look down, it is below; when you stand straight and look forward, it is in front; when you give it up and ignore it, it is behind you ..."⁹⁰ It does not mean that his "Mysterious" can be seen, nor is it a concrete thing. Yang is just trying to show that "the Mysterious" is everywhere, just as, in Lao Tzu's description, "Tao", which, when confronted, cannot be seen, and, when followed, still cannot be seen.⁹¹ Therefore, in this respect, his concept of "the Mysterious" is the same as Lao Tzu's "Tao". However, he believed

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.164.

⁸⁹ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, p.2.

⁹⁰ Pu-hsien Han, The Essential History of Medieval and Ancient Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: Cheng Chung Book Co., 1960), p.46.

⁹¹ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, p.21.

that the evolution of the cosmos was from the interchange
 92
 of the Yin and the Yang elements. His view of 'the
 Mysterious' seems to be idealistic and his Yin Yang theory
 for the outcome of the ten thousand things seems to be
 materialistic, because the interchange of the Yin and
 the Yang elements means the interchange of the Yin air
 and the Yang air which has been conceived of as a very
 fine material substance.

In the post-Han period, it was Ho Yen (何晏)
 and Wang Pi (王弼) who initiated the "Refined conversations
 on esoteric researches" (玄學清談). In their
 explanation and interpretation of Lao Tzu's 'Tao'
 they had inserted in it their own way of thinking.
 They believed that Being arose out of Non-being, and 'Tao'
 belonged to Non-being. 'Tao' to them was self-so-ness,
 spontaneity. Ho Yen made a quote from Hsia Hou-hsuan
 (夏侯玄), a contemporary scholar: "Heaven and earth
 move according to spontaneity and the sage acts according
 to spontaneity (天地以自然運, 聖人以自然用)."
 93
 Wang said, "Heaven and earth employ spontaneity, wu wei,
 and non-purposeful creation. The ten thousand things take
 care of and govern themselves.... The earth does not
 produce fowls for the beasts but the beasts eat fowls, nor

 92

Pu-hsien Han, The Essential History of Medieval
 and Ancient Chinese Philosophy, p. 47.

93

Chao-tsu Yung, The Naturalism of the Wei T'sin
 Period, (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1966), pp. 11-12.

does the earth produce dogs for men but men eat dogs. Practise wu wei in respect to the ten thousand things and they will all occupy their proper places."⁹⁴ Ho in his commentary to the Lao Tzu said, "The ten thousand things are produced from Tao but they do not know why or how they are being produced."⁹⁵ (This is because there is no purpose behind their creation.) This means that, to them, "Tao" was spontaneity; there was "nothing" behind the creation of all things; therefore, Non-being is used to describe this "Tao". But still there must be an explanation for the outcome of Being. Wang Pi maintained that Being must have come from Non-being,⁹⁶ for if Being came from another Being, this might go on indefinitely. So, logically, Being has to be from Non-being. In this respect, they fell in line with the idealistic view of "Tao".

Wang Ch'ung (王充), a scholar of the Later Han period, based his ontological and cosmological principle on Lao Tzu's "Way of Heaven (天道)". He said,

⁹⁴ Pu-hsien Han, The Essential History of Medieval and Ancient Chinese Philosophy, pp.75-76.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.76.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.77.

"The Way of Heaven is natural, wu wei; if it reprimands and warns people, then it is having deliberate activity and is not natural"⁹⁷ He stressed heavily "naturalness" and "spontaneity" and a special essay (自然篇), which is a good exposition of his philosophy, has been written by him about it.

"Heaven does not deliberately produce the five cereals, silk and hemp, in order to feed men, Things come out by themselves and men make them into clothing and food!...."⁹⁸

Still, the Way of Heaven did not explain too well how things first came about. Then he supplemented that with "Air" (氣), out of which evolved the myriad things. He said, "Heaven and Earth mix their effluvia; the ten thousand things come about by themselves." (天地合氣萬物自生)⁹⁹ This effluvium was, to Wang Ch'ung, the primal origin of all things. He did not explain what was before "Air". In his research on Wang's philosophy, A.A. Petrov, a Soviet scholar on Chinese studies, found that Wang Ch'ung's "Air" was the pre-existent material on which the ten thousand things were based. He believed that

⁹⁷ Hui Huang, ed., The Balance of Opinions (Ch'ang Sha: The Commercial Press, 1938), p.635.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.775.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.775.

since Wang regarded "Air" as the common substance in all the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), "Air" must have a material content and must be a certain thing with material form.¹⁰⁰ Wang's main concern was not on "Air" being the mother of all things, but on spontaneity. Heaven and earth mixed their effluvia and things came out by themselves. Such was the opinion of Wang Ch'ung. Mixing is here the activity of wu wei, mixing without a purpose, mixing naturally, at random. It is likened to the movement of the universe, which has no purpose, but is naturally and mechanically performing wu wei. Again he said that Heaven moves, not with a will to produce things; but, out of this movement, things came out by themselves; this was spontaneity.¹⁰¹ In this way, wu wei and spontaneity were considered as the cause and the effect of creation. His notion of "Air" is materialistic; but the coming into existence of "Air", being "spontaneous", coming out by itself, mixing at random, is still a mystery, for he did not give details on this aspect of the question.

Huai Nan Tzu (淮南子), a Taoist prince of

¹⁰⁰ Compiled by the Editorial Committee of Literary, Historical and Philosophical Magazines, An Assemblage of Treatises on Ancient Chinese Philosophy (Peking: The China Book Co., 1957), p.168.

¹⁰¹ Hui Huang, ed., Discourses on Judgement and Evaluation, p.776.

the end of the Former Han Dynasty, developed his philosophy through a combination of Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's ideas, the I Ching, the Yin Yang theory, and the mystical thought of the Han times. He gave a substantial description of the "Tao", incorporating the ideas of naturalness, wu wei, and the properties of "Tao". The first chapter of his book states:

Now, Tao overlays the heavens and supports the earth. It surrounds the four quarters of space and goes beyond the eight poles (the eight points of the compass in the periphery of the world). Its height is such that it cannot be reached, its depth such that it cannot be plumbed. It envelops heaven and earth; it distributes and hands over what has not (yet) received a form, (i.e. the primal substance). Flowing like a fountain and bubbling like a spring, it empties and gradually replenishes; gurgling chaotically, it becomes turbid and gradually clarifies. Therefore, vertically, it occupies (the whole space between) heaven and earth; horizontally, it fills up (the whole space between) the Four Seas. It spends itself without exhaustion and (unlike the sun) without (difference between) morning and evening. If spreading, it will cover the six main directions of space; if rolled up, it would not fill the hollow of the hand. Contracted, it can expand; concealed, it can come to light; weak, it can be (come) strong; soft, it can be (come) hard. Lying athwart the four cardinal points, it holds within itself the yin and the yang; it binds the universe together and emblazons it with the "three luminaries". It is imbued with highest eminence and instinct with superior powers; it is most tenuous and subtle. Mountains owe it their height; abysses, their depth; quadrupeds, their power to walk; birds,

to fly. Sun and moon owe it their brightness; stars and planets, their power to follow their courses.¹⁰²

As for the origin of the cosmos, he attributed it to the forces of Yin and Yang, which in turn came out of Tao.

He said in the same chapter:

In the beginning, the two August Ones, Fu-hsi and Shen-nung (meaning here the two forces of Yin and Yang), having got a hold on the Tao, stood in the centre (of power). Their minds roamed in harmony with Change and thus did they pacify the four quarters of space.¹⁰³

The theme of Huan Nan Tzu is that "Tao" is seen as the all-pervading power, and "Tao" is also naturalness. With Taoist teachings as the main core, teachings of other schools are also included in the body of his thought.

The scholars and thinkers cited in the above section have been classified by the modern scholars in China as idealistic thinkers (e.g. Ho Yen and Wang Pi), materialistic thinkers (e.g. Wang Ch'ung), and a combination of both (e.g. Yang Hsiung). Thus a literary debate has been waged to determine whether the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu is idealistic or materialistic. With the conceptions expounded by the previous commentators, thinkers, and scholars as background and model, modern

¹⁰² An Liu, Hui Nan Tzu (Taipei: Chung Hua Book Co., 1965), p.1.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.1.

Chinese scholars back up their arguments by analyzing the materialistic and idealistic elements in Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's philosophy.

B. The Materialistic "Tao"

The ancient materialistic thinkers were searching for an answer to the question of the origin of the material world: How did things come into existence? They tried to reach back to an absolute primary substance to account for the origin of the Myriad things, and the substance was believed to be "air" or "essence of air". "Air" is a special term in Chinese metaphysics indicating a very fine material substance which is versatile, changeable, in constant motion. Kuan Tzu (管子) devoted a number of chapters to the discussion of this "air" problem. He believed that the cosmos arose out of "air", which was void, quiet, and formless, and he called it "Tao".¹⁰⁴ It was a great break-through in religion and philosophy, because such a view substituted for a creation by a god or any supernatural power a process of intelligible evolution. Such a stand is very materialistic. Many later thinkers also hold the same view. The Kuan Tzu says that "Tao", lies between heaven and earth; its immensity

¹⁰⁴ Kung-wei Huang, History of Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: Kashmir Book Co., 1966), p.92.

has no outer limit, and its smallness has no inner part at all.¹⁰⁵ Since "Tao" was taken as "air" which was

made of minute particles devoid of extent, it could be said that, "in its smallness, it had no inner part"

(其小無內). However, as it was everywhere, it could also be said that, "in its immensity, it had no outer limit" (其大無外). "Tao" was believed to be everywhere and was the originator of everything. Similar writing can be found in the Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. For example, in Chapter sixty-seven of the Tao Te Ching it is said:

The whole world says that "my way" is great (the meaning of 大 is given by chap. xxv), but seems worthless, like nothing. But it is just because "my way" is great that it is like nothing.¹⁰⁶

In the last chapter of the Chuang Tzu it is said:

The largest thing has no outer limit; it is called the Great One. The small-est thing has nothing within it; it is called the Small One. That which has not thickness cannot be piled up; yet it is limitless in dimension.¹⁰⁷

Since Kuan Tzu's view of the "Tao" has a materialistic content, some scholars tend to think that the "Tao" in

¹⁰⁵ Yu-lan Fung, A Collection of Discourses on History of Chinese Philosophy (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publication Co., 1958), p.136.

¹⁰⁶ Chia-loh Yang, ed., Commentary on Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching, p.67.

¹⁰⁷ National Studies Arrangement Board, The Accumulated Works of the Ancient Thinkers and Philosophers, Vol.3 (8 vols.), p.476.

the Lao Tzu and the Chuang Tzu is also materialistic. Those who believe in Lao Tzu's philosophy being materialistic point out that, first, Lao Tzu's "Tao" is the spontaneous nature of the ever-existing material world and is a material existence, that is to say it is within the material realm. Second, "Tao" is made of infinitely minute material particles, probably like atoms or electrons, or the constituents of "air"; or "Tao" may be the primary chaotic form of matter. Third, "Tao" is the objective principle (客觀規律) of the material world.¹⁰⁸ Some regard "Tao" as only a concept and thus think that Lao Tzu's philosophy is idealistic. But there are some who take "Tao" not as a concept, but as a true substance and thus think that Lao's philosophy is materialistic. For Fung Yu-lan, there are different possible interpretations of the Tao Te Ching. The "Tao" in the Tao Te Ching in many instances can be interpreted in two ways. However, there is one place where "Tao" can only be interpreted as a true substance. This is in Chapter twenty-five: "There is something formed in a confusion, born before heaven and earth." The phrase "formed in a confusion" (混成) is what Fung Yu-lan wants to pinpoint, for

¹⁰⁸ Feng Kuan and Yü S. Lin, A Collection of Treatises on the History of the Philosophy of the Ch'un Chiu Period, p.274.

that phrase should be used to describe material things, and conceptual things cannot be described as "formed in a confusion". According to Fung, that material thing, in Chinese philosophical terms, is called "air". Mr. Fung further states that Lao Tzu's "Tao" is not the ordinary air which flows around, but is the "essence of air" (精氣) which is a very, very fine substance.¹⁰⁹ Since there are various interpretations for the Tao Te Ching, the "Nameless" or "Non-being" as an alternative name of "Tao" can be taken as material like the "essence of air". "Tao" is "air" or "essence of air" which is invisible and intangible; therefore Lao Tzu tells us that we can "look at it, but it cannot be seen; listen to it, but it cannot be heard"¹¹⁰ It is called the "Nameless" because there is no suitable term to designate such a thing, especially in Lao Tzu's time. Therefore, in this respect, Mr. Fung does not regard Lao Tzu's "Non-being" or the "Nameless" as something mysterious and idealistic.¹¹¹

As for Chuang Tzu, he is regarded by most as

¹⁰⁹ Yu-lan Fung, A Collection of Discourses on History of Chinese Philosophy, pp.58-59.

¹¹⁰ Lung-yuan Sung, Explanatory Notes on the Tao Teh Ching, p.20.

¹¹¹ Yu-lan Fung, A Collection of Discourses on History of Chinese Philosophy (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publication Co., 1958), p.59.

an idealistic thinker.¹¹² However, there are still traces of what may be described as materialism, especially in his cosmology. In the Chuang Tze, there are passages speaking about "air" or "essence of air" as the primary element in the formation of the myriad things. In the chapter of "Knowledge Wandering North", it is said:

The life of man is the result of the accumulation of the vital breath. Its accumulation is life; its dispersion is death. If life and death are companions, what do we have to worry about! Now, the ten thousand things are one. What we admire is the lively; what we loathe is the decaying. But the decaying in turn will become the lively and the lively will turn again into the decay. Therefore, it is said: "Pervading the world there is but one "breath"."¹¹³

(人之生,氣之聚也---故曰通天下之一氣耳)

This shows only that, in this passage at least, Chuang Tzu seems to have looked upon "breath" or "air" (氣) as the primal substance of the "ten thousand things", and that "breath", in all this context, should probably not be understood by "breath", but rather by something like "subtle primal substance." Again, in replying to Hui Szu about the death of his wife, Chuang Tzu said:

¹¹² Chuang Tzu is also regarded by some as a mystic. He liked to use fancy terms in his speech and intelligent imaginative tales to illustrate his points. His teachings are mainly conceptual dealing with ideas, the mind, and attitude towards things. Therefore some view him as an idealist.

¹¹³ Hsien-ch'ien Wang, Explanatory Notes on the Chuang Tzu Book, p.124.

If we examine how things began, there was no life; not only no life, but also originally no (bodily) form; not only no form, but originally no (vital) breath. There, amid the intermingling of the dark chaos, a change took place and (the vital) breath came into being. (The vital) breath changed and there was a (bodily) form. There was a change in the (bodily) form and then there was life. Now another change occurred and death came.¹¹⁴
 (察其始而本無 生...今又變而之死)

Again, the quotation confirms how important the "vital air" is in giving birth to concrete things as well as life. It is "air" which causes all the transformations. This change taking place in the "air" was seen by Chuang Tzu and his followers as a process for the evolution of the ten thousand things, and there are scholars including Fung Yu-lan who regard such a stand as materialistic.¹¹⁵

C. The Idealistic "Tao"

As opposed to the materialistic interpretation, there are those who firmly believe that the "Tao" in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu is solely idealistic. Research has been done to back up their standpoint. Judging from his writings, Mr. Fung Yu-lan thinks that there are both materialistic and idealistic elements in the Lao Tzu and

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.100.

¹¹⁵ Yu-lan Fung, A New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, p.381.

Chuang Tzu, materialistic, because the "Tao" has overthrown the belief in a creator god, a belief of a superstitious, or religious, nature; and idealistic, because the "Tao" has such an elusive meaning, so difficult to pin down, that the ultimate search for it can hardly fail to veer towards abstraction, and to lead to "idealism". Kuan Feng and Lin Yü-shih (關鋒, 林幸時) are among the most prominent modern Chinese scholars who have tried to prove that "Tao" is idealistic, a completely spiritual concept, not corresponding to any material reality such as air, atom, or chaos. "Tao" is void, "Non-being", a metaphysical concept transcending time and space. They are very doubtful if there is any material thing that is formless, not occupying any space and is "in effect" all the time. As far as they can see, Lao Tzu's "Tao" is neither the process by which things come into effect, nor is it the active principle by which the material things are kept in motion; but "Tao" is what produced heaven and earth and the ten thousand things.¹¹⁶ As discussed before, "Tao" is both "Non-being" and "Being", two aspects of a single ontological principle. The "Non-being" gives rise to "Being" which is the beginning of

¹¹⁶ Feng Kuan and Yü S. Lin, A Collection of Treatises on the History of the Philosophy of the Ch'un Chiu Period, p.287.

all the myriad things, and "Non-being" is a state imagined to account for the stage which came before the appearance of "Being". It can, of course, only be of a non-material nature, which means that the cosmos and the ten thousand things spring, in last analysis, from "Non-being", which makes no sense from a materialistic point of view.

Kuan Feng and Lin Yü-shih refute the view of "Tao" as an atomic "aura" or as the "essence of air" which many people have made it out to be.¹¹⁷ Actually, atoms and "essence of air" are similar in the fact that they cannot be felt by the hand or seen by the eye, but they are not entirely non-material; they do occupy space and have weight. Lao Tzu, however, never said that "Tao" has a form or has weight, but suggests just the opposite.. Atoms have a form and air can be felt when it is in movement. Another point being raised is that "Tao" has been compared with the "Uncarved Block" and thus been held as of material nature. But the "Uncarved Block" is only used as a picturesque phrase to illustrate the state of nature as untouched by any artificial effort, unpolished, unadorned, and just being itself as it is. An "objective" idealist would say that the absolute spirit or ideal is the "Uncarved Block".¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.289.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.302.

From the sentence "there is Something formed in confusion" Fung Yu-lan concludes that "Tao" is materialistic. However, one should not exclude the possibility that "Tao" is an absolute spiritual entity or Being, formed within an undefinable realm, and that is why it is formed in some sort of confusion. Mr. Kuan and Mr. Lin contend that "Tao" is not even an objective principle or law because an objective principle is the arrangement according to which material things are kept in motion and existence, and it cannot be divorced from material things and be independent. If it can stand by itself without the existence of the material things or if it is the producer of the material things, it can no longer be an objective principle any more, otherwise God can also be taken as an objective principle. Lao Tzu's "Tao" can be independent of the material things and exist by itself; it is prior to the ten thousand things and is the producer of everything; therefore it is not an objective principle.¹¹⁹ They think the question is that a preliminary decision has to be made as to whether the matter or the spirit comes first (物質與精神, 誰屬第一性?). Materialism would put matter first and spirit second, while for idealism spirit would

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.301.

come first, and matter second. As discussed in the above section, Lao Tzu's "Tao" cannot be an objective principle, nor does it belong to the material realm, and so it can only be a spirit (精神), though not in a religious sense, an absolute spirit existing before man and anything else. In this way, Lao Tzu gives priority to spirit over matter, this spirit being an "absolute" spirit, independent of human thought and existing by itself, so that Lao Tzu's thought is classified as "objective" idealism.¹²⁰ (客觀唯心主義)

As discussed above, Fung Yu-lan believes that the "air" or "essence of air" which is the origin of life and of the ten thousand things is something material. However, he points out that, for Chuang Tzu, there is another thing ranking higher than "air", "air" coming only second. For him, "Tao" comes first, and it is from "Tao" that "air" is produced. Mr. Fung remarks that, if there is another thing above "air", that thing must be of a conceptual nature; thereupon, Chuang Tzu is turning towards idealism.¹²¹ In the thinking of Chuang Tzu, everything is in constant change. A thing at present

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp.303-304.

¹²¹ Yu-lan Fung, A Collection of Discourses on History of Chinese Philosophy, p.60.

is no longer the same as a moment ago. Things are relative and exist along with their opposite counter-part. When there is bigness, there is smallness; when there is life, there is death. Thus far, his thought is dualist and relativist.¹²² "Tao", however, transcends this realm of dualism; it is prior to being; it is non-material.

There is another important point which can be adduced in favour of the view that "Tao" is non-material. Chuang Tzu said that that which makes things as things must itself not be a thing. Further similar remarks can be adduced: The destroyer of life does not die and the begetter of life does not go through birth (殺生者不死, 生生者不生).¹²³ This indicates that such a "thing" (destroyer or begetter of life), no matter what it is, is not likely to be material. It has to be something constant, eternal, and absolute. This means that it is something spiritual, and abstract. Fung Yu-lan comments that Chuang Tzu's "Tao" is an "empty logical construction" (邏輯的虛構), and his thought is empty mysticism.¹²⁴ To Kuan Feng, Chuang Tzu's "Tao" is the transformation of Lao Tzu's objective idealism.

¹²² Ibid., p.60.

¹²³ Feng Kuan, The Inner Chapters of the Chuang Tzu Book: Interpretations and Criticisms (Peking: The China Book Co., 1961), p.43.

¹²⁴ Yu-lan Fung, A New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy, p.385.

into subjective idealism due to the fact that true man or perfect man (真人, 至人), who is like Chuang Tzu himself, has unified with "Tao" as one body: "Tao" is himself, and himself is "Tao". There is no more relativism, the realms of time and space have been transcended, and the state of the selfless absolute has been reached. He can be totally independent and absolutely free, wandering in perfect happiness. From such a viewpoint, Chuang Tzu's philosophy has been classified as "subjective idealism" (主觀唯心主義).¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Feng Kwan, The Inner Chapters of the Chuang Tzu Book: Interpretations and Criticisms, pp.2-5.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

"Tao", which means "the way", is a very common word in Chinese: we speak of the way of heaven, the way of man, the way of doing things, the way of Since very ancient times, the word has been frequently used. It underlies all ancient Chinese thought, no matter from what school it proceeds. For the Confucianists, "Tao" is an ethical concept representing the proper way of acting, be it moral, ethical, social, or political. For the Taoists, it is a metaphysical concept, standing for the universe as a whole. Generally, "Tao" was conceived by the ancient Chinese thinkers as a cosmic whole in which all things, visible and invisible, coexisted in mutual interdependence. The Confucianists, the Mohists, and the Legalists strove to regulate human behaviour and keep things in order so as to maintain harmony in the cosmic whole. On the contrary, the Taoists saw the cosmic whole as in a state of natural equilibrium, which deliberate human action would only disturb. If left alone, equilibrium would always restore itself. It was from this belief that the concept of wu wei evolved. "Tao" was seen as something in the nature of an all-pervasive force, a field of energy, which bathed and

pervaded everything. It was the ultimate source and sustainer of all existence, and life was only a specialized aspect of it.¹²⁶ Since "Tao" is so closely tied in with the notion of nature, ontology and cosmology, some scholars are tempted to equate "Tao" with the Western notion of God, to whom creation owes its origin. Canon Farrar said, "We have long personified under the name of Nature the sum total of God's laws as observed in the physical world; and now the notion of Nature as a distinct, living, independent entity seems to be ineradicable alike from our literature and our systems of philosophy."¹²⁷

Although the attributes of "Tao" in many instances are very similar to the attributes of God, it has been argued in this thesis that "Tao" is not God. "Tao", unlike God, is too elusive to be described. Professor Jankélévitch commented that all attempts to describe the "Tao" are doomed to fail because the Taoists, being somewhat sloppy thinkers, found it easier and more pleasant to rhapsodize about it (e.g. Lao Tzu) or to impart, through anecdotes and approximations, some elusive, unconnected, glimpses of it (e.g. Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu), than to make the

¹²⁶ Lecture notes from Professor L. Jankélévitch.

¹²⁷ James Legge, tr., The Texts of Taoism, Part I, p.13.

necessary effort to try and realize it fully in their own consciousnesses. The comment is a bit harsh on the Taoist thinkers. They may be unsystematic in their thinking, but their ideas are original and insightful. Lao Tzu's writing is terse and preceptive while Chuang Tzu's is allusive and much appreciated for its literary value. It is just their style, and such way of writing seems to suit them best; and indeed, "Tao" itself is almost impossible to describe. Evan Morgan's view on this matter is that behind all, both the visible and the invisible world, "there is a Supreme Power, to which Lao Tzu gave the conventional name of Tao. It is only a conventional term because we cannot comprehend it and therefore it is impossible to give it an adequate name. Its quality, power, and magnitude is so vast and deep that no human language, -- language belonging to the material universe alone -- can describe it. Were any term comprehensive enough to connote it, it would at once lose its chief characteristic of the Infinite. Once a thing is defined, it becomes limited. Therefore, the conventional name of Great Tao is only an indicative name, -- indicative of immensity and quality and the way. But whilst no name can adequately define it, yet it is possible for the mind to have a good conception of it, through description of its works and by analogues

of what it is like."¹²⁸ That is, through an effort of literary empathy, one may come to realize "Tao". Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu have given us the qualities, characteristics, and the works of "Tao" thus enabling us to glimpse the various facets of "Tao".

Although Lao and Chuang lived about two hundred years apart their philosophy was essentially the same. While Lao Tzu was succinct on most of his topics, Chuang Tzu elaborated more on nature and the unnecessary, futile, effort of man. In regard to "Tao", both of them shared the same view that it is the ontological principle, the understanding of which has to come through an inner awareness, in which our true consciousness interfuses with the ultimate reality of all things. Such an understanding cannot be expressed by words and has to be acquired through a long period of an experiencing process and cultivation. "Tao" has always been obscured by inadequate understanding. In his writings, Chuang Tzu is trying to tell us that there is no real distinction between affirmation and negation; as soon as there is affirmation, there is negation; as soon as there is negation, there is affirmation. There is nothing which

¹²⁸ Evan Morgan, Tao The Great Luminant (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1969), p.xxxii.

is not this, and there is nothing which is not that. When this and that are not placed in polarized positions, we come to the principle of "Tao".¹²⁹ As opposed to intuitive thinking, systematic and analytical thinking tends to break things up to examine their different parts to study bits by bits in detail. However, after divisional studies, it is necessary to put the parts and pieces together in order to understand the whole thing. In like manner, the Taoists put the stress on the understanding of the unity of multiplicity, or the Oneness, for all things are interdependent; there is no phenomenon which can be truly understood by isolating it from other things. However, it has to be pointed out that the Taoists do not work much on analysis, and instead, they jump to the final stage of taking in the whole thing or the Oneness which is their main concern. There is a famous saying of Chuang Tzu: Heaven and Earth and I live together; the ten thousand things and I are one (天地與我並生, 萬物與我為一). This togetherness and oneness is the result of his ontological awareness, which is beyond our ordinary senses. It is the realm of non-being, the Great Infinite in which there is neither time nor space, no limitations

¹²⁹ Chung-yuan Chang, "The Meaning of Tao", Traditional China, edited by James T.C. Liu and Wei-ming Tu (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970), p.148.

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and distinctions. Chuang Tzu gives a description of the realm of non-being:

There is birth, there is death; there is issuing forth, there is entering in. That through which one passes in and out without seeing its form -- that is the Gate of Heaven. The Gate of Heaven is Non-being. All things sprang from Non-being.¹³¹

This realm of Non-being is what Lao Tzu called "Tao", the "Mother of All Things", the Absolute Reality from which all birth comes about.¹³² Lao Tzu's greatness lies in his bringing out the notion of 'Tao' outside the reign of heaven and earth and the ten thousand things. Fung Yu-lan has done substantial work on Taoist philosophy but he has not explained why and how the word 'Tao' was used; he just said 'Tao' was used for convenience sake. Amid the superstitious beliefs of his time Lao Tzu forwarded a great breakthrough in the history of thought. From the 'Way of Heaven', 'Way of the Emperors', and 'Way of Man', he dropped Heaven, Emperors, and Man to single out 'Tao', the way, and at the same time cast away the religious, superstitious connotations of those phrases to establish his unprecedented metaphysical and ontological principle. Lao Tzu also opened up the gateway for later

130 Ibid., p. 150.

131 Ibid., p. 150.

132 Ibid., p. 150.

philosophical and intellectual thought development on nature, on man, and on reason. Man's inquisitive mind was further expanded in all dimensions. Lao Tze first talked about "Tao"; when it came to Chuang Tzu, he talked about heaven (nature) and man. In the later Ch'in and Han periods, thinkers came to talk about naturalness and spontaneity, as exemplified in Wang Ch'ung's Essay on Spontaneity and Fan Chen's Essay on the Extinction of the Spirit (after death) (王充之自然篇及范曄之神滅論). At that stage, the importance of the notion of "Tao" had faded and the principle of spontaneity had taken over as the basis for the explanation of the world and human activities. Under the challenge of Hinayana Buddhism, Neo-Confucianist and Taoist thought emerged in the Sung and Ming periods. The Taoist stress on the principle of nature and of the natural order rather than on the work of a creator or a divine Providence may have had some influence on the Eighteenth Century French Physiocrats, the economist Quesnay and the philosopher La Mettrie.¹³³ In reviewing Taoist thought, Szu-ma T'an (司馬談) commented:

The Taoist school of thought enables men to concentrate the mind on things they do,

¹³³ Cheng-tung Wei, A Critical Approach to the Chinese Cultures (Taipei: The Buffalo Book Co., Ltd., 1968), pp.329-330.

....., to enjoy whatever is around them. Its technique is to act according to the smooth succession of the Yin and the Yang, to pick out the good points of Confucianism and Mohism, to grasp the essence of the Nominalism and the Legalism, to handle human affairs by following the trend of time and events. Its ideas are terse and easy to master. It accomplishes more with less effort.¹³⁴

Some people say that Taoist thought is pessimistic, misanthropic, and that it is a philosophy of escape. This is merely a misunderstanding. One who knows Taoist thought well finds it lively, optimistic, comforting and a source of strength. It recommends a proper, natural development of the potentiality of an individual, as the fundamental unit which in turn would further the development of the whole network of society, the world, and the universe. If it is a philosophy of escape, it, at least, offers a place and a way to escape, to find a way out, instead of remaining tied to the ground.

¹³⁴ Szu-ma Ch'ien, The History, Vol.X (10 vols.) p.3289.

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